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ABSTRACT

When teaching writing to adult learners, teachers must achieve a balance between "content" and "mechanics." The first step is to assign "real" writing for "real" purposes. The next step is to teach the writing process more than the product and teach the place that correct "mechanics" (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) holds at each step of the writing process. Good beginning exercises include having students generate life maps and write about the events on their map or having students write about people who have had a big impact on their lives or made contributions to their town. After students have put their thoughts on paper, they should be taught to conference and revise. Conferences should focus on whether students' writing is engaging, logical, and clear as to its intent. Conferences are the best place to teach "mechanics" in "mini-lessons" on "real-world mechanics." Mini-lessons should be 5 to 20 minutes long and focus on a single specific objective. Finally, students should be taught how to finalize their writing for a real audience. Students should be encouraged to publish their writing, including by contacting World Wide Web sites that publish amateur writers' work, writing children's books, writing letters to the editor of the local newspaper, and writing for newsletters. (Contains six references.) (MN)

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CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF ENHANCING ADULT LITERACY

Teacher to Teacher

Ohio Literacy Resource Center
Enhancing Adult Literacy

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Writing: Keeping it Real

Bill Kist

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"When I was in fourth grade, my Grandpa died. No one I had ever known had died before that day. Even though it was so many years ago, I can still remember everything about when he died and the time that led up to his funeral. After my grandpa died, my world seemed to change. I felt a little older, like in those few days from the time he died to the time after the funeral, I had somehow grown up. After he passed away, my parents seemed much more real to me, I had never seen them show so much caution before. Even my grandma changed before my eyes. Sadly, she went from being a card playing, wagonwise-making host to a person who gradually did less and less. Throughout all of this however, my memories of the time I spent with my grandpa and grandma, and my grandpa's death, have remained some of the most cherished memories that I have."

-Excerpt from writing from an undergraduate, Fall, 2002

What makes for good writing? One thing that jumps out at the reader of the above passage is that the topic is intensely personal, and yet something that each of us has experienced in one way or another. So even though the writer is writing about something that is very personal and unique to her experience, there are universal themes and ideas to which all readers can relate. Now take a moment, and think about those memorable, unique turning points in your life--what are the things that you would try to get down on paper about those events?

I'm guessing that "correct punctuation and grammar" was not the first thing that popped into your mind when you thought about what you would like to get down on paper. I would guess that the parts of speech and correct spelling used by the above writer also were not what most impressed you when you read the first sentence--"When I was in fourth grade, my Grandpa died." And yet you probably would have thought of these things if incorrect grammar had interfered with your understanding of the message about the student's grandfather.

This is the dilemma that teachers of writing face and the dilemma faced by writers themselves! A balance must be achieved between "content" and "mechanics." Just acknowledging this balance and having a dialogue about what makes for good writing is probably the first step toward good writing instruction. The question is not whether or not to teach grammar/mechanics, but rather "what aspects of grammar can we teach to enhance and improve students' writing and when and how can we best teach them?" (Weaver et al., 2001, p. 19).

"Real" Writing and Teaching the Writing Process

So what's a writing teacher to do? The first step is to assign "real" writing for "real" purposes, and then, to teach the writing process more than the product and to teach the place that correct "mechanics" (spelling, punctuation, and grammar) holds at each step of the writing process.

Most teachers now teach writing within the "writing process"--brainstorming/gathering information, drafting, conferencing, revising, and editing/publishing. First, students need to be taught how to generate ideas for writing. Simple journaling or webbing pre-writing activities may generate these ideas. If research is a necessary component of the writing assignment, then students will need to go to the library or get on the Internet to help them generate ideas. At this point, students should be free to explore writing about things that are meaningful to them, such as the grandfather's death that my student wrote about.

Of course, probably the person each writer knows best is himself or herself, so here is an effective beginning assignment:

Life Map Assignment

Students make a list of at least 15 events that have occurred in their lives. Once they generate the lists, they make a life map on a 16 x 20 sheet of tag board depicting those events. They can be as creative as they want, but they must start with their birth dates and chronologically show at least 15 events, including the date and a word or two describing the event, and draw a symbol representing the event. Once the life maps are finished

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and displayed in the room, we begin the writing--simply writing the story of one of the events from the life map (Weaver et al., 2001, p. 28). If some students are shy about writing about themselves, then perhaps they may feel more comfortable writing about people who have made a difference in their lives, but always the emphasis is still on making meaningful, purposeful writing. A teacher I know asks students to use one piece of paper for each year of their lives and to place on it a picture or a description of a historical event that took place during that year. The student then takes the papers home and works with family members to write a significant life event from the student's life or the family in general on the page for each year. The student then adds his or her memories of that family event or other memories he or she has. This becomes a book that could be laminated and augmented with photographs. An extension of this activity is to have a page of the book be for future years and ask the student to write "I hope" and list some dreams or wishes for the future. Another extension of this activity is to make a flow chart or timeline of the events of the student's life.

A variation of this activity is described by Edelstein (2001) in an assignment called "My Book of Others." Each page of the "book" describes a person who has made an impact on the student's life.

My Book of Others

Ronna L. Edelstein, Abbot Middle School, West Bloomfield Michigan.
As published in *Ideas Plus, Book 19* (2001_ NCTE (pp. 17-20).

Honoring Others
If you had written a book, to whom would you dedicate it?

Learning From Others
Write about some lessons you learned from someone.

Reaching Out To Others
If you won a million dollars, with whom would you share it?

Thanking a Special Other
Write a thank you note to a teacher who has influenced you.

Getting To Know a Special Other
Interview someone you see everyday, but know little about.

Electing a Presidential Other
Write a campaign speech for a friend or relative you believe would be a great U.S. President.

Of course, students can also write about people they don't know. They can interview people they feel have made a contribution to their towns. For an example of a class project that involved having students take oral histories see "What Did You Do in the War, Grandma" at www.stg.brown.edu/projects/WWII_Women/tocCS.html. Students in this project not only were engaged in meaningful writing, they were also learning the "oral history" historian's technique, and they were learning a good deal about WWII! But don't think that you have to interview a war veteran to have meaningful writing. Steve Harman, of the *CBS Evening News*, has been doing a series of stories over the past few years, in which he goes into a new town and simply picks a name at random out of the phone book and goes and interviews the person. The title of the series is "Everybody Has a Story," and indeed he has found this to be the case as these random picks yield the most fascinating, poignant, funny stories.

Once students have started getting some thoughts down on paper, they need to be led into the drafting stage of the writing process. At this point, students need to know the different formats available to them in addition to the standard five-paragraph essay. Some alternative writing forms are listed below. Students should be encouraged to read good examples of the form of writing they are attempting, so they can use the good examples as models for their own writing.

Other Examples of "Real Writing" Besides the Five-Paragraph Essay

Screenplay	Commercial script	Letter of complaint	Cover letter
Resume	Friendly letter	Journal entry	Book/movie review
Restaurant/food review	Reader response log	Short story	Job Manual
Personal narrative	Travel Log	Survival Story	News Article
Editorial	Interview Transcript	Description from alternative point of view	
Free verse poetry	Found poetry	Fictional narrative	Dialogue
How-to article	Comparison/contrast	Persuasive essay	Speech
Product evaluation	Advertisement	Research paper	Business letter
Technical support manual	News feature article	College application essay	Parody
Satire	Self-portrait	Fairy tale	Fable
Survey results analysis	Problem-solution essay	Biographical sketch	Humorous essay
Scene for a TV show	Song lyrics	Monologue	Play anecdote
Abstract	Preface or foreword	Extended metaphor	Stream-of-consciousness
Sonnet	Two-voice poem	Shape poem	Memory (recollection)
Legend	Newscaster script	Recipe	Haiku
Obituary	Summary	Picture book story	Greeting card
Description	Science fiction	Letter of recommendation	Eviction notice
Arrest warrant	Email	Thank-you	Directions
Declaration of war	Job Application	Deed	Cartoon
Public announcement	Love letter	Dictionary entries	Inspection analysis
Rejection letter	Game review	Billboard	Memo
Product jingles	Stand-up comedy script	Nursery rhymes	Menu descriptions
Epitaph	Psychological profile	Channel of distribution	State of union address

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Revising and Editing

Once a student has put his or her thoughts into some form, the next step is teaching students how to conference and revise. Students should confer with a teacher and with one or more peers about each writing piece. This is probably the most difficult part of teaching the writing process. It is not easy to accept criticism, and also it is at this time that "mechanics" issues can obscure people's reactions to the real essence of good writing. How can teachers help students take the feedback they have received and create another draft? Probably the best way is try to focus conferences around such questions as "What moved me about this piece?" and "What confused me about this piece?" A great way to get students to read and comment on each other's work is to ask them to write positive remarks on sticky notes and affix them next to the parts they liked best.

Regie Routman (2000) points out that we need to teach students to constantly reread and edit their work as they are writing: "In our own writing we are constantly rereading and checking, and . . . we fix up and change our work in the process of writing, not just at the end" (p. 300). She suggests the following questions for use during a writing conference:

- Does the beginning engage the reader?
- Is my opening clear about my intention for this piece?
- Does the order seem logical?
- Are my words interesting enough?
- Does this part make sense?
- Was the reader amused, or does it sound more like a serious piece?
- Was the reader bored? Where?

And what about the place of grammar in these writing conferences? This is actually the best "place" in the entire writing process to teach grammar and mechanics in general, for it is here that writers encounter "real world" mechanics issues that can be addressed by a quick mini-lesson on the spot from a teacher. A "mini-lesson" can be anywhere from five to 20 minutes in length, but it focuses on one specific objective--the correct use of semi-colons, for example. See Atwell (1998) for a complete list of possible mini-lesson.

Connie Weaver (1996) reviewed research on grammar instruction and found the following:

- For most students, the systematic study of grammar is not even particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors.
- Studying formal grammar is less helpful to writers than simply discussing grammatical constructions and usage in the context of writing.
- Learning punctuation in the context of writing is much more effective than studying punctuation marks and rules for punctuation in isolation.
- For both first and second language learners, extensive reading significantly promotes grammatical fluency and a command of the syntactic resources of the language.
- Teach only the grammatical concepts that are critically needed for editing writing, and teach these concepts and terms mostly through mini-lessons and conferences, while helping students edit.
- Have students experiment with and discuss various activities in sentence combining, expanding, and manipulating.
- Give students plenty of opportunities and encouragement to write: for a variety of purposes and real audiences. Teacher response should include assistance with sentence structure and the mechanics of writing, during both revision and edit ing.
- Give students plenty of time to read, during both revision and editing.

Harry Noden (1999) also provides several ideas for useful mini-lessons at this point in the writing process, as he advocates teaching students to learn about grammar as an artist would learn about brush strokes: painting with participles, painting with absolutes, painting with appositives, painting with adjectives, and painting with action verbs.

When in doubt about a grammatical question, there are many helpful online guides that can answer any tricky mechanics/ grammar question. Some of the sites below are described by Patterson and Pipkin (2001):

Guide to Grammar and Writing
http://webster.commnet.edu/grammar/index.htm

Pop-Up Grammar
www.brownless.org/durk/grammar/quizpage.html

The Internet TESL Journal
http//a4esl.org/q/h/grammar.html

Grammar Bytes
www.chompchomp.com/menu.htm

Grammar Safari
http://deil.lang.uiuc.edu/web.pages/grammarsafari.html

The Online English Grammar
www.edufind.com/english/grammar/index.cfm

And, of course, when desperate, don't forget the "Grammar Rock" cartoons (part of ABC's "SchoolHouse Rock"). These fantastically memorable songs ("Lolly, Lolly, Lolly, Get your Adverbs Here;" "Conjunction, Junction;" "Unpack Your Adjectives") are available at any bookstore either on CD or video. They are well remembered by kids and adults!

Publishing

Finally, students should be taught the publishing step--how to finalize writing for a real audience. On a very simple level, this could be accomplished by photocopying each student's work and distributing it in a class literary anthology or on a class web site. The Internet has also greatly increased the opportunities for student publishing. Many people publish their daily journals on the Internet in what are called "Web logs." Just do an Internet search using the word "web log" and you will find many examples of people publishing journal entries on a daily basis on their web sites. Or there are many web sites that will publish the work of amateur writers, such as Treasurepages.com (www.treasurepages.com) and Writers Hood (www.writershood.com). Some of these charge a fee, but many do not.

Everyday class assignments can also encourage publishing. Students could write books for their own children, for

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example, or they could write family histories or descriptions of significant family events. Most copy stores, such as Kinko's, have the ability to bind small books, so that these writings can be preserved and kept in the family for generations. A family cookbook could also be written that would re-create special family meals and recipes from the past.

Other ideas include asking students to write a letter to the editor of a local newspaper. Or many students may belong to organizations that have newsletters that might encourage submissions from members. Contests also provide avenues for publishing. The Internet abounds with writing contests (see www.writingcontests.net or www.writing-world.com). The OLRC also sponsors an annual writers' conference. Information for teachers is provided in the fall every year. Students' writing is evaluated by a team. Pieces are selected for published volumes called *Beginnings*. (See http://literacy.kent.edu for more information.)

The era of self-publishing has greatly increased the options for the publishing step in teaching the writing process. Student writers have the ability to reach wide audiences in an instant.

In Conclusion

In sum, one of the best references on writing is Nancie Atwell's *In the Middle* (1998) which gives a great model of how to run a reader/writer workshop including how to teach mini-lessons, how to respond to readers and writers and how to set up personal spelling and editing lists. The bottom line is that Atwell's classroom features "real" writing and reading. The students are not completing assignments that are just designed to earn a grade. Students are becoming real readers and writers themselves. As students write for real purposes and for real audiences, they automatically go through all of the steps of the writing process.

We all remember years of doing English homework, copying and diagramming sentences, and writing artificial essays for only the teacher's eyes to see. But how much real writing did we do? How much spelling and grammar was taught with the goal of making us better writers? The focus for writing instruction needs to be on making sure that everything we do helps our writers come to terms with those important things we all have to say in our writing and then have the ability to say them!

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